



FACE . . .

Faithful Conversation

JOHN L. STROMMEN

F*faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality*¹ establishes a healthy and promising tone for the ongoing ELCA discussions about homosexuality and will serve as a valuable resource to congregations wishing to enter that dialogue. As several of the contributors to this collection of essays contend, there is much at stake in the current debate; it will make us either stronger in our unity and witness or weaker as a divided and bickering church. As I read the book, I felt optimistic about the Lutheran church becoming stronger—only, however, if we first learn to talk about these issues with one another before we vote on them! Urging such dialogue, *Faithful Conversation* directs our attention to issues far greater than the current debate around blessing of gay unions and ordination of gay clergy in order to help us see these issues as opportunities for growth in mission.

Specifically, the volume opens the door to a long overdue teaching opportunity about how to read Scripture in a way that honors the complex, multilayered nature of the Bible and avoids the pitfalls of a fundamentalist hermeneutic. For instance, Mark Allen Powell evenhandedly examines the material relating to homosexuality, concluding that a biblical view of the issue is not as cut and dried as some have suggested. One is left, appropriately, with a deeper appreciation for the concerns of people on both sides of the issue.

Further, the book points out how difficult it is to sacrifice our personal freedom in response to the call of discipleship to love our neighbor while living in a culture that tends to deify the rights of the individual. What does it mean, Martha Ellen Stortz asks, if we begin our deliberations not with sexual orientation and personal rights, but with our baptismal identity and communal obligations? What I do with *my* body should always be subject to what I do as a member of *Christ's* body.

In another chapter, Daniel Olson offers a stimulating proposal on how to proceed with congregational dialogue by contending that the current debate on homosexuality, which often devolves into name-calling and stereotyping, could and should be all about mission! Obviously part of the mission is to move beyond objectifying homosexual persons as abstractions to be debated or demonizing them as abominations to be rejected. But what Olson really emphasizes is our witness as a Christian community, namely, how we treat one another when we dis-

¹James M. Childs Jr., ed., *Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

(continued on page 84)

TO FACE

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Are congregations willing, or even able, to have conversations about sexuality, no less homosexuality? What kind of conversation might that be? What are the ground rules, the boundaries, the presuppositions of those participating? What resources might assist that conversation? One resource, in the ELCA, is the book commissioned by the presidents of the church's seminaries and written by able and respected members of those faculties: *Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality*. This volume attempts to facilitate our conversation, assisting us with useful information, encouraging us to engage others with respect, and attempting in various ways to lay a theological framework for the endeavor.

I suspect that this or any other book on the subject will engender more than a few responses of, "Do we have to talk about sex all the time?" or "All the church ever talks about anymore is sex," or "Don't get me started!" It is unfortunate that those outside the ELCA, if they pay any attention at all, frequently hear us speaking only about sex and bishops. There are, to be sure, many other foci and issues, but this is what they hear and read.

Can this book deliver? Well, it can deliver something. At least it allows us to hear theologians of the church attempting to deal with the possibility of ordaining practicing homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex unions. They wrestle not only with the issues but with the shape and tone of the conversation.

Mark Allan Powell gives an excellent overview of the scriptural passages regarding homosexuality. His opening line is no secret, "Every reference in the Bible to sexual relations between same-sex partners is negative" (19). But he does not end there as he seeks to find some way to continue the dialogue. Powell attempts to find this in the biblical admonition that "it is not good that man should be alone." While all might say, "Amen," using this particular text as a way of opening the possibility of affirming homosexual practice seems a significant stretch.

James Nestingen seeks to use traditional Lutheran categories in speaking to this issue. Law and gospel, two-kingdoms language, the centrality of justification by grace through faith, and the offer of forgiveness inform the essay. Here, also, one will find convictions about the ordained ministry, the call, and the concept of office. In a world and church often enamored with "rights," Nestingen asserts, "Nobody has a right to ministry" (49). One is, after all, called to serve in this public ministry.

Martha Ellen Stortz's essay is helpful in reminding us of our "primary iden-

(continued on page 85)

agree. We are in fact called to do something that doesn't come naturally, something for which we need to be "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). While we are not called to be like-minded on everything, we are called to listen, honor, and respect each other—even to risk being changed by conversation with one another.

Learning this is crucial, I think, for American Lutheran churches, because it is so easy for us to settle into the comfortable lifestyles of the privileged, avoiding any unsettling topic. As Gary Simpson has pointed out in his book *Critical Social Theory*,² this may be in part because there are currently no healthy functioning models for public discourse about values, beliefs, and tough issues. The two predominant models in our culture are not particularly helpful. The "liberal" model asserts that everyone must decide his or her own truth, and therefore no moral stance can be "imposed" in public conversation, while the "agonistic" model of social discourse permits the party in power to dictate the important values and therefore strongly discourages public dialogue. An example of this took place before the war in Iraq when many of those in power, and many citizens as well, termed any questions or objections to the war intrinsically unpatriotic, immediately cutting off any conversation. (To be fair, the same thing happens on the other side as well, which is why the "political correctness" backlash developed.) As Simpson points out, the church ought to be a place where there is deliberation on public matters in such a way that participants are honored and their concerns respected.

What does our congregation plan to do in addressing these questions? We intend to work at learning how to talk together about controversial issues for the common purpose of mission. Beginning with a retreat for the congregation council and staff, and then expanding to the rest of the congregation, we hope to form a community of moral discourse and deliberation. This will not be an easy venture, and while we have not yet fully worked out our strategy on this topic, I believe that *Faithful Conversation* will aid us along the way. For instance, we plan to offer a pastor-led class based on the book, and I may take up some of the broader issues raised by individual chapters in a sermon series. Ultimately, I believe that if our members can learn how to talk to one another about such a difficult issue, while attending to Scripture, tradition, culture, science, and experience as well as *Faithful Conversation* does, we will take a huge step forward. ☩

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²Gary M. Simpson, *Critical Social Theory: Prophetic Reason, Civil Society, and Christian Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

tity.” Can we rethink sexuality from the focus of our baptism into the body of Christ? She also offers a helpful ground rule, “Beginning with baptism promises to keep conversations polite; it will also keep them faithful” (59).

Richard J. Perry Jr. and José David Rodríguez seek to open us (the predominant culture) to the voices of minority cultures, cultures that have often been unheard or even refused a seat at the table. Such is often the case concerning homosexuals as well. The authors note the absence of an avowed homosexual among the writers of these essays.

Daniel L. Olson offers new information and insight regarding scientific studies in the area of sexuality, specifically homosexuality. Particularly helpful is his concern for how the participants around the church treat each other in this conversation. He fears it will be with “contempt, betrayal, and exclusion.” Acknowledging the demonization engaged in by both sides of the debate, Olson writes:

The mission that our Lord has given us is a stake in our discussions of sexuality in the church, but not in the way that many people think. The mission of the church will not be advanced by victory for either side in the current controversy over homosexuality....The mission of the church will be furthered if the people on those two sides can talk and listen to each other without attacking in moral outrage or turning away in moral disgust. (110)

The book presents essays in the areas of biblical theology, confessional theology, baptismal theology, multi-cultural theology, and pastoral theology. The articles by Nestingen and Olson alone are worth the price of admission. To the question of whether or not the volume will be used, and thus useful in congregational study and life, I offer three comments: (1) The length and language may be more than many adult education classes in congregations want to tackle. The essays aren’t easily handled in one-hour sessions, though the questions offered at the end of each essay are helpful. (2) While neither “side” in the conversation will come away satisfied (which may speak well for the book), there will be suspicions that the authors are on one side or the other. The authors acknowledge this to a greater or lesser extent. It is, after all, an issue that seemingly defies neutrality. (3) Much of the book will do little to assuage the perception in many parts of the church that Scripture and the confessions function decreasingly as norm and influence in the decision-making processes of this church (ELCA). (4) While the fate of the Christian church does not depend upon this issue, the future of the ELCA will be radically altered both by what is decided and how the decision is made.

May God grant us faith, wisdom, and forgiveness in the process. ☩

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